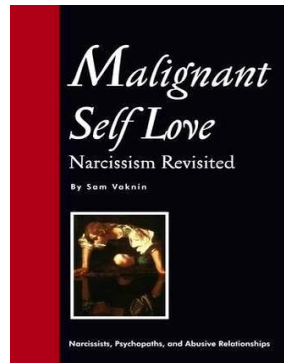


On the Incest Taboo The Offspring of Aeolus

Incest as an Autoerotic Social and Cultural Act

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"...An experience with an adult may seem merely a curious and pointless game, or it may be a hideous trauma leaving lifelong psychic scars. In many cases the reaction of parents and society determines the child's interpretation of the event. What would have been a trivial and soon-forgotten act becomes traumatic if the mother cries, the father rages, and the police interrogate the child."

(Encyclopedia Britannica, 2004 Edition)

In contemporary thought, incest is invariably associated with child abuse and its horrific, long-lasting, and often irreversible consequences. Incest is not such a clear-cut matter as it has been made out to be over millennia of taboo. Many participants claim to have enjoyed the act and its physical and emotional consequences. It is often the result of seduction. In some cases, two consenting and fully informed adults are involved.

Many types of relationships, which are defined as incestuous, are between genetically unrelated parties (a stepfather and a daughter), or between fictive kin or between classificatory kin (that belong to the same matriline or patriline). In certain societies (the Native American or the Chinese) it is sufficient to carry the same family name (=to belong to the same clan) and marriage is forbidden.

Some incest prohibitions relate to sexual acts - others to marriage. In some societies, incest is mandatory or prohibited, according to the social class or particular circumstances (Ugarit, Bali, Papua New Guinea, Polynesian and Melanesian islands). In others, the Royal House started a tradition of incestuous marriages, which was later imitated by lower classes (Ancient Egypt, Hawaii, Pre-Columbian Mixtec). Some societies are more tolerant of consensual incest than others (Japan, India until the 1930's, Australia).

The list is long and it serves to demonstrate the diversity of attitudes towards this most universal of taboos. Generally put, we can say that a prohibition to have sex with or marry a related person should be classified as an incest prohibition.

Perhaps the strongest feature of incest has been hitherto downplayed: that it is, essentially, an *autoerotic act*.

Having sex with a first-degree blood relative is like having sex with oneself. It is a Narcissistic act and like all acts Narcissistic, it involves the objectification of the partner. The incestuous Narcissist over-values and then devalues his sexual partner. He is devoid of empathy (cannot see the other's point of view or put himself in her shoes).

For an in depth treatment of [narcissism](#) and its psychosexual dimension, see these (click on the links):

[*Narcissistic and Psychopathic Parents and Their Children*](#)

[*Narcissistic Personality Disorder \(NPD\) and Pathological Narcissism FAQs*](#)

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Paradoxically, it is the reaction of society that transforms incest into such a disruptive phenomenon. The condemnation, the horror, the revulsion and the attendant social sanctions interfere with the internal processes and dynamics of the

incestuous family. It is from society that the child learns that something is horribly wrong, that he should feel guilty, and that the offending parent is a defective role model.

As a direct result, the formation of the child's Superego is stunted and it remains infantile, ideal, sadistic, perfectionist, demanding and punishing. The child's Ego, on the other hand, is likely to be replaced by a False Ego version, whose job it is to suffer the social consequences of the hideous act.

To sum up: society's reactions in the case of incest are pathogenic and are most likely to produce a Narcissistic or a Borderline patient. Dysempathic, exploitative, emotionally labile, immature, and in eternal search for Narcissistic Supply – the child becomes a replica of his incestuous and socially-castigated parent.

If so, why did human societies develop such pathogenic responses? In other words, why is incest considered a taboo in all known human collectives and cultures? Why are incestuous liaisons treated so harshly and punitively?

Freud said that incest provokes horror because it touches upon our forbidden, ambivalent emotions towards members of our close family. This ambivalence covers both aggression towards other members (forbidden and punishable) and (sexual) attraction to them (doubly forbidden and punishable).

Edward Westermarck proffered an opposite view that the domestic proximity of the members of the family breeds sexual repulsion (the epigenetic rule known as the Westermarck effect) to counter naturally occurring genetic sexual attraction. The incest taboo simply reflects emotional and biological realities within the family rather than aiming to restrain the inbred instincts of its members, claimed Westermarck.

Though much-disputed by geneticists, some scholars maintain that the incest taboo may have been originally designed to prevent the degeneration of the genetic stock of the clan or tribe through intra-family breeding (closed endogamy). But, even if true, this no longer applies. In today's world incest rarely results in pregnancy and the transmission of genetic material. Sex today is about recreation as much as procreation.

Good contraceptives should, therefore, encourage incestuous, couples. In many other species inbreeding or straightforward incest are the norm. Finally, in most countries, incest prohibitions apply also to non-genetically-related people.

It seems, therefore, that the incest taboo was and is aimed at one thing in particular: to preserve the family unit and its proper functioning.

Incest is more than a mere manifestation of a given personality disorder or a paraphilia (incest is considered by many to be a subtype of pedophilia). It harks back to the very nature of the family. It is closely entangled with its functions and with its contribution to the development of the individual within it.

The family is an efficient venue for the transmission of accumulated property as well as information - both horizontally (among family members) and vertically (down the generations). The process of socialization largely relies on these familial mechanisms, making the family the most important agent of socialization by far.

The family is a mechanism for the allocation of genetic and material wealth. Worldly goods are passed on from one generation to the next through succession, inheritance and residence. Genetic material is handed down through the sexual act. It is the mandate of the family to increase both by accumulating property and by marrying outside the family (exogamy).

Clearly, incest prevents both. It preserves a limited genetic pool and makes an increase of material possessions through intermarriage all but impossible.

The family's roles are not merely materialistic, though.

One of the main businesses of the family is to teach to its members self control, self regulation and healthy adaptation. Family members share space and resources and siblings share the mother's emotions and attention. Similarly, the family educates its young members to master their drives and to postpone the self-gratification which attaches to acting upon them.

The incest taboo conditions children to control their erotic drive by abstaining from ingratiating themselves with members of the opposite sex within the same family. There could be little question that incest constitutes a lack of control and impedes the proper separation of impulse (or stimulus) from action.

Additionally, incest probably interferes with the defensive aspects of the family's existence. It is through the family that aggression is legitimately channeled, expressed and externalized. By imposing discipline and hierarchy on its members, the family is transformed into a cohesive and efficient war machine. It absorbs economic resources, social status and members of other families. It forms alliances and fights other clans over scarce goods, tangible and intangible.

This efficacy is undermined by incest. It is virtually impossible to maintain discipline and hierarchy in an incestuous family where some members assume sexual roles not normally theirs. Sex is an expression of power – emotional and physical. The members of the family involved in incest surrender power and assume it out of the regular flow patterns that have made the family the formidable apparatus that it is.

These new power politics weaken the family, both internally and externally. Internally, emotive reactions (such as the jealousy of other family members) and clashing authorities and responsibilities are likely to undo the delicate unit. Externally, the family is vulnerable to ostracism and more official forms of intervention and dismantling.

Finally, the family is an identity endowment mechanism. It bestows identity upon its members. Internally, the members of the family derive meaning from their position in the family tree and its "organization chart" (which conform to societal expectations and norms). Externally, through exogamy, by incorporating "strangers", the family absorbs other identities and thus enhances social solidarity (Claude Levy-Strauss) at the expense of the solidarity of the nuclear, original family.

Exogamy, as often noted, allows for the creation of extended alliances. The "identity creep" of the family is in total opposition to incest. The latter increases the solidarity and cohesiveness of the incestuous family – but at the expense of its ability to digest and absorb other identities of other family units. Incest, in other words, adversely affects social cohesion and solidarity.

Lastly, as aforementioned, incest interferes with well-established and rigid patterns of inheritance and property allocation. Such disruption is likely to have led in primitive societies to disputes and conflicts - including armed clashes and deaths. To prevent such recurrent and costly bloodshed was one of the intentions of the incest taboo.

The more primitive the society, the more strict and elaborate the set of incest prohibitions and the fiercer the reactions of society to violations. It appears that the less violent the dispute settlement methods and mechanisms in a given culture – the more lenient the attitude to incest.

The incest taboo is, therefore, a cultural trait. Protective of the efficient mechanism of the family, society sought to minimize disruption to its activities and to the clear flows of authority, responsibilities, material wealth and information horizontally and vertically.

Incest threatened to unravel this magnificent creation - the family. Alarmed by the possible consequences (internal and external feuds, a rise in the level of aggression and violence) – society introduced the taboo. It came replete with physical and emotional sanctions: stigmatization, revulsion and horror, imprisonment, the demolition of the errant and socially mutant family cell.

As long as societies revolve around the relegation of power, its sharing, its acquisition and dispensation – there will always exist an incest taboo. But in a different societal and cultural setting, it is conceivable not to have such a taboo.

We can easily imagine a society where incest is extolled, taught, and practiced - and out-breeding is regarded with horror and revulsion.

The incestuous marriages among members of the royal households of Europe were intended to preserve the familial property and expand the clan's territory. They were normative, not aberrant. Marrying an outsider was considered abhorrent.

An incestuous society - where incest is the norm - is conceivable even today.

Two out of many possible scenarios:

1. "The Lot Scenario"

A plague or some other natural disaster decimate the population of planet Earth. People remain alive only in isolated clusters, co-habiting only with their closest kin. Surely incestuous procreation is preferable to virtuous extermination. Incest becomes normative.

Incest is as entrenched a taboo as cannibalism. Yet, it is better to eat the flesh of your dead football team mates than perish high up on the Andes (a harrowing tale of survival recounted in the book and eponymous film, "Alive").

2. The Egyptian Scenario

Resources become so scarce that family units scramble to keep them exclusively within the clan.

Exogamy - marrying outside the clan - amounts to a unilateral transfer of scarce resources to outsiders and strangers. Incest becomes an economic imperative.

An incestuous society would be either utopian or dystopian, depending on the reader's point of view - but that it is possible is doubtless.

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